

## Wonder, Beauty, and Light

Matthew 2:1-12

*Epiphany/ 6<sup>th</sup> January 2019*

*“Star of wonder, star of night, star with royal beauty bright, westward leading, still proceeding, guide us to thy perfect light.”* John Henry Hopkins, Jr. (1820-1891) wrote this carol, in 1857, for his nieces and nephews to sing in a Christmas pageant (and was later published in 1863). A gifted hymn writer, music teacher, Episcopalian priest, he gave the eulogy at the funeral of Ulysses S. Grant in 1885.

Hopkins brilliantly shines a light on the star by turning it into a character in his nativity pageant. In this respect, he takes his cue from Matthew, because in Matthew’s gospel the star is the driving character in his birth narrative. The star is alive, it has a kind of personality; it has wisdom, it has a will, it has purpose, it moves. It’s dynamic. Where would the magi be without the star? The star summons them and sends them and leads them and guides them to a greater light, the star’s “perfect light,” the source of the star’s brilliance, the source of all light.

Epiphany. From the Greek *epipháneia* (ἐπιφάνεια) meaning “manifestation” or “appearance.” The word is derived from the verb *phainein* (φαίνειν), meaning “to appear.” In classical Greek the word was used to describe the appearance of dawn, or the arrival of an enemy in battle, but it was also used to describe what it felt like to be in worship and encounter a manifestation of the divine. Such an experience was also known as a *theophany*, the appearance of a god or God. And so, *epiphany* and *theophany* could be used interchangeably. The Feast of Epiphany had enormous significance in the early Church, especially for Orthodox Christians in the Eastern Church (which continues to this day). Orthodox Christians also call it The Theophany. Epiphany predates Christmas as the day to celebrate the birth of Christ, as it celebrates the coming of God’s light into the world. It’s also known as The Day of the Lights or, simply, The Lights.

The brilliance of the star led the magi to the birth of a greater light. The epiphany or manifestation of Jesus was so astonishing, so astounding, that the nations of the world (represented by these magi, these Gentiles, these wise ones from foreign nations), they could see in his birth the dawning of a new day for all people. The prophet Isaiah wrote long ago as if he had a glimpse of this moment in time, “Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you. For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the LORD will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you. Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. Lift up your eyes and look around... Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice...” (Isaiah 60:1-5b).

*You shall see and be radiant. Your heart shall thrill and rejoice,* Isaiah said. The same could be same of these magi who followed the star that led them to the source of light, these magi who witnessed with their own eyes his luminous face as it transfigured and transformed them. In the presence of such light their hearts thrilled and rejoiced. Matthew tells us that when the magi saw that the star stopped moving they knew they had arrived, they were where they were supposed to be, and Matthew tells us “they were overwhelmed with joy” (Mt. 12:10).

*Overwhelmed with joy.* This is a remarkable construction in Greek. It reads “...*echaresan charan megalen sphodra.*” Perhaps you can recognize familiar words embedded in the Greek. Did you hear *char/a*? The Greek word for “joy” is *chara*; the Greek word for “rejoice” is *chairu*; and the Greek word for “grace” is *charis*. *Grace*, *joy*, and *rejoice* all share the same root. *Mega*, is

familiar, the Greek word for “great” or “exceeding.” So a literal rendering would be, the magi “rejoiced with exceeding great joy.” And an even more literal translation would be, “...they were joyed with exceeding great joy.” They were *joyed*. Joy happened to them. They were touched by joy.

So, pause for a moment and pay attention to the images rising up within you right now. Can you imagine the magi’s arrival, feel their joy? Enter into the story and imagine what that joy must have felt like. We always says, “Hear the Word of God....” but we also need to *feel* the Word of God. Enter the feeling. What’s rising within you as you enter the story? Can you sense their joy? And because they were joyed, due to their en-*joy*-ment, overwhelmed by this epiphany before them—*they began to kneel*. They knelt down, they fell down, and worshipped him. And they opened to him, on bended knees, the treasures.

It’s astonishing what can happen when we follow a star and begin the journey, a journey that leads to the place where we are overwhelmed by joy, the place where we are invited to kneel, and open the treasures of our hearts. If you think about it, for all their wisdom, it’s kind of foolhardy to follow a star, to put trust in astrological events, leave home, leave family, leave the familiar, and venture off on a journey because of ancient prophecies and stories about a child who would be born king of the world. There’s nothing rational, logical, or sane about any of this. It’s dangerous and risky. Would you do that? Could you do that? It’s ludicrous, if you think about it.

But maybe we shouldn’t think about it, at least not too much. What if we put thought aside? What if we silence reason and logic and free ourselves from all the ways they hinder and constrict us? What if something else led our way, something more akin to wisdom? What if we hitched our wagon to *this* star and allowed ourselves to go where it wants to lead, trusting that it will lead us to Christ, to the place of new birth, our birth, our rebirth? What if we are still summoned by that star?

What if we allow the star of wonder to lead the way in our lives? Amazement. Mystery. Wonder, like God, is endless in its capacity to re-enchant the world. In the end, it’s wonder that leads us and calls us and challenges us and startles us. What if we allowed ourselves to be led by wonder? What if wonderment led the way? Just imagine where the Spirit could take us! Just imagine what we would experience of God’s love and grace and joy.

And what if we were summoned by beauty, led by beauty? What if we were transfixed by the beautiful, instead of the ugly or cruel or negative or destructive forces all around us? Beauty beatifies. What if we allow beauty to lead? If we as Christians, as the Church were led by beauty, just imagine where the Spirit could take us, and what the Spirit could do with us! Just imagine how our lives, our experiences of God’s goodness would cause us to delight with joy. Just imagine being overwhelmed by the beauty of God, transfixed by God’s beauty, the beauty of grace and love. And, what if, then, overwhelmed and dizzy, we find ourselves falling to our knees in adoration, worship, and praise? The poet T. S. Eliot (1888-1965) said it best:

*You are not here to verify,  
Instruct yourself, or inform curiosity  
Or carry report. You are here to kneel.*<sup>1</sup>

And what if, then, in worshipful joy, we offer Christ the treasures of our hearts? What if.... Just imagine!

Wonder and beauty summon us to the light of Christ's presence. In his light, when we are close to his light, our lives are transfigured and transformed. And when this happens, like the magi, our lives are never again the same. How can they be? Remember, the magi returned home by another road, not the same old road (Mt. 2:12).

Where would we be without the star? The star summons us and sends us and leads us and guides us to a greater light, wonder and beauty serve the "perfect light," because it's the source of the star's brilliance, the source of all light. And the Light still summons us and calls out to us: Come! Follow! This way!

I was struck by wonder and beauty this past week. It was in a very short poem by the contemporary Polish poet Adam Zagajewski. It spoke to me deeply, reflected my experience, gave voice to my hopes in the coming year. And then I thought of the magi, imagined what their experience might have been like; and I sensed that this—yes, this—this is what epiphany looks, feels like:

*I've taken long walks  
craving one thing only:  
lightening,  
transformation,  
you.*<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> T. S. Eliot, "Little Gidding," Four Quartets.

<sup>2</sup> Adam Zagajewski, "Transformation," in *Without End: New and Selected Poems*, trans. Clare Cavanagh et al. (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2002), 214.